

Show Me the Father
John 14:8-21
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I was at a ministers' meeting last week. One of my colleagues, Bruce Dobyns, was in the first week of his 3-month sabbatical; you could tell because he was the only one in the group wearing shorts and a T-shirt. He passed around a picture that showed his gift to the congregation for his time away: it was a life-size cardboard cutout of himself in his robe. That's quite a reminder. He said he's been testing it out. He put it in the pulpit during his sermon time, and it took three weeks for anyone to notice the difference. But that got me thinking about the things we leave behind to help people remember us. A life-size cardboard cut-out may be a bit extreme, but we leave pictures, letters, tokens of familiarity. What do we leave behind when we go away so that the people who love us can keep on loving us, even when we're not there?

That's exactly what Jesus' disciples are struggling with in today's passage. It takes place in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday, the night when Jesus is arrested. He's told his disciples several times that he is about to leave them, and they are beginning to panic. What will they do when their leader is gone? Who will be their Rabbi? Who will be their guide?

That prompts Philip to make his statement: "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." In other words, "Jesus, if you can just prove to us that God is with us, if you can prove to us God is real, then we'll be OK. Nothing to worry about." How often do we make these kinds of statements: "Just show me a sign, God! A lightning bolt, a rainbow, a bag of money dropped on my head, anything!"

But is it ever really enough? Philip says, "If you show me God, then I'll be satisfied." But would the demand for proof end there? If God showed up at your door one day and say, "Hi, it's me, there ya go," would that be enough for us? Or would we then want to have a conversation, or request a miracle? We think we want to see God, but in the ancient times the belief was that the sight of God was so glorious that anyone who looked upon him would instantly die. Do we really want to see God? A human simply cannot handle God's presence in its purest form.

That's why God had to distill himself into human form. Jesus tells Philip that he's already seen God. He says, "Don't you know me, Philip? If you've seen me, you've seen God." But Philip wasn't looking for him. God comes to us in a million different ways, but we have to have the eyes to see him.

One of my favorite memories of Boy Scout Camp was lying out in a field one night looking up at the cloudless sky. When I first looked up, all I saw was a random scattering of stars. But then our leader pointed out Orion, and the Big Dipper, and Cassiopeia. And suddenly, this random scattering of stars became patterns and images.

We can only see what we are trained to see. An astronomer will see far more in the sky than an untrained eye. I look at a plant and I see something to be mowed over; a botanist looks at a plant and sees an intricate lifeform. You might look at one of my children's paintings and see a mess of lines and colors. I look at it and see fine art.

The point is we can only see what we're looking to see. Philip wasn't looking for God when he looked at Jesus, and yet there he was, right in front of his face. Is God right in front of our face? Are we looking for something else instead of looking for God? Could those coincidences, those lucky breaks, those unexplainable things be more than just a random scattering?

This divine eyesight was crucial for the disciples, because they were about to be on their own. The only way the disciples would be able to be transformed from a rag-tag bunch of wishy-washy followers into confident, bold leaders was if Jesus isn't there. As long as Jesus is there, there's no reason for them to step up. But once he's gone, it's up to them.

That reminds me of one of my favorite movies, "Hoosiers." Gene Hackman is Norman Dale, the controversial coach of an Indiana high school basketball team, and his assistant is Shooter, an alcoholic good-for-nothing played by Dennis Hopper. Coach Dale knows Shooter is a basketball mastermind, but has hid behind his addiction. So, during a game, Dale conspires with the referee to get thrown out, meaning that Shooter has to take over the team. He does, and using the ol' Picket Fence play, leads the team to victory.

Jesus sees potential in his disciples, and he knows they can become so much more. He tells them, "If you have faith in me, you're going to do even greater things than I did." But he also knows they're going to need help. I mean, they're still human, right?

So Jesus tells them, "If you keep the faith, I'm going to ask my Father to send you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth." We know that Counselor to be the Holy Spirit, which is poured out on the disciples at Pentecost and which truly does empower them to do great things.

The word used for "Counselor" here is the Greek word "parakletos." It's translated a number of different ways in different translations of the Bible – Counselor, Comforter, and some translations leave it in the original, calling it the Paraclete. The Greek word was used to describe someone who stood in for another person, like someone testifying in a courtroom on behalf of someone else. A "parakletos" would stand by your side when you needed it, and would stand in your place when you couldn't.

That's why I think the best translation of "parakletos" is "advocate." I think of an advocate as someone who offers support and encouragement, someone who defends another person, someone who will step up to help, no matter the cost. That's what the Holy Spirit does for us; it advocates for us.

It is this Advocate that will empower the disciples to do great things. It might sound a bit strange at first when Jesus tells the disciples that they will do even greater things than him. We look at his miraculous healings and resurrections and food multiplying and think there's no way we could do that. But don't forget what else Jesus did. He showed compassion to a widow, he stood up for a woman about to be stoned to death, and he bent down to wash the feet of the disciples.

We are called to do even greater things than these. Jesus was only one person, so his disciples were able to do 12 times the good deeds that he was. Through the giving of the Holy Spirit, we are then called to do even more in Jesus' name. We aren't called merely to reproduce the work of Jesus; we are called to represent him in this world. There's a natural progression here. As Jesus embodied the Father's presence in this world, so now the Spirit works through us to embody Jesus' presence into this world.

Every pronoun Jesus uses in this passage is plural, not singular. We are, in every sense of the term, the body of Christ.

I hope you realize the profound implications of what Jesus is saying here. He invokes nothing less than the power of the Trinity and places it at our disposal. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all mentioned in these verses, and then Jesus says, “Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” There’s a web of connectivity here, an intrinsic harmony between God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and us. We are in them and they are in us.

But is there room? Is there room for them to dwell in us? Or do some things need to be cleaned out to make space? Is there room for prayer and scripture reading? Do we make church a priority instead of just one of many choices in our social and cultural buffet? Have we left room in our lives? The power of the Holy Trinity is at our disposal to help us live lives of meaning and significance and purpose – is there room?

Show us the Father. Do we really want to see God? Look around. God is in each of us. Sure, some of us may cover it up more than others. Some of us may have crowded Him out. But realize that the world is looking to us, those who call themselves believers, to see God. We have to make room.

What does God look like today? He looks like nurses and missionaries and teachers and Little League coaches. He looks like me. He looks like you. Go now to do even greater things than Jesus – not miracles and signs, but deeds of humility, and service, and love. You are the body of Christ. You may never have to face the decision whether or not to die for your faith, but every day you face the decision whether or not to live for it. Show us the Father.